Rappel Anchor Failure — Old Webbing

Wyoming, Grand Teton National Park, Middle Teton, Glacier Route

On July 3, two male climbers summited the Middle Teton via the Northwest Couloir Route. As the weather deteriorated and winds increased, the climbers elected to descend the Middle Teton Glacier Route (Grade III 5.4 AI2+) instead of the standard 3rd-class Southwest Couloir. The weather was cloudy with temperatures near 40°F, winds between 20 and 30 mph, and intermittent snow/rain and scattered thunderstorms.

The climbers encountered steep terrain 100 feet below the summit and decided to rappel. They completed two 60-meter rappels from anchors they placed. The climbers then found a fixed anchor that consisted of two pieces of webbing slung around a rock. They inspected the webbing and placed a camming device as a backup. The cam was not tensioned to the slings, so the webbing remained isolated as they bounce-tested the anchor. They deemed the anchor adequate.

The first climber rappelled 175 feet to a snowfield. He detached from the rope and began searching for the next anchor. Shortly after this, the second climber (age 60) removed the backup cam and began rappelling. The webbing broke shortly after he began the rappel and he fell approximately 250 feet over rock, snow, and ice before landing on a ledge at 12,200 feet.

His partner descended, anchored the fallen climber, and then assessed his injuries. The patient remained awake and oriented but was nonambulatory due to a leg injury. He was ultimately diagnosed with a shoulder dislocation with three associated minor fractures, fractures of C1 and C2 vertebrae, and a fractured tibia. The uninjured climber contacted SAR at 3:54 p.m., and a helicopter was requested.

At 4:36 p.m., three climbing rangers were flown in to assess the accident site. High winds prevented a short-haul rescue, and instead two rangers were dropped at the Lower Saddle for a ground rescue. Six additional rangers were shuttled to the Lower Saddle. The first two rangers climbed the North Ridge of the Middle Teton in poor conditions. They advised subsequent teams to approach via the Glacier Route. The six additional rangers, equipped with gear to perform a technical ground rescue, descended to the Middle Teton Glacier and climbed toward the injured climber.

At 7:20 p.m., the first climbing ranger arrived on scene. At 7:45 p.m., rangers reported favorable winds, and at 8:10 p.m., the patient and a ranger were short-hauled off the mountain.

ANALYSIS

The primary lesson here is the importance of using sound rappel anchors. Even with inspection, gear found in the field is suspect. Erring on the side of caution and building one's own anchors is a reasonable way to minimize this risk. The patient later said that in his 52 years of climbing, he always placed his own anchors. The exception on this one day was after poor weather pushed them to make haste into unfamiliar terrain. A quick and inexpensive solution for building—or in this case reinforcing—a sling anchor is to carry a small knife, some cord, and a "cheapskate locker." (Source: Grand Teton National Park Search and Rescue Report.)

Images

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